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ABSTRACT

Efforts addressed at the pervasive school dropout problem in New York City received a boost in 1978 with the development of large scale, centrally initiated programs to reduce the number of high school dropouts. Based on the recommendations of two studies, the New York City Board of Education's Division of High Schools established outreach centers in neighborhoods perceived to have large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people. The centers aimed to assist dropouts in developing realistic goals, overcoming educational problems, developing and implementing individual educational programs, obtaining educational experiences and career awareness, and acquiring jobs. Reports on students' achievement and program characteristics showed favorable results for the program. In addition, programs to prevent potential dropouts from leaving school were set up in twelve target high schools with very high or rapidly increasing dropout percentages. The programs identified potential dropouts and provided services to help students obtain high school equivalency and get jobs, improve learning skills among low achievers, and to prepare students for vocations. Problems continue to affect the dropout situation and dropout programs in New York City, and the attempt to confront the issue as a central rather than as a piecemeal effort is an important first step toward reducing dropout numbers. (Author/MJL)

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RETRIEVAL AND PREVENTION:

An Analysis of Recently Instituted Dropout Programs in New York City Public High Schools

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I. BACKGROUND

In New York City there has long been a school dropout problem, and the numbers indicated have been consistently large in proportion to the in-school population. In the 1820's, for instance, a study conducted by the Public School Society " . . . showed that there were 463 schools . . . with about 25,000 pupils. The Society schools had 6,000 students, the charity schools had about 4,000, and another 15,000 were in private day schools. In addition, there were about 12,000 school 'dropouts' under the age of fifteen, and another 12,000 who were without any education whatever." [1] In 1914, with school enrollment approaching a million, "Among children below age fourteen, the working-paper age, nearly 50 percent left school. Even in high school, 30 percent or more of the students dropped out each year." [2] In the 1950's and 1960's, with a school population of a million or more, dropout rates appeared to decline somewhat to below 50 percent. In its 1979 document, The Dropout Report, the New York

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[1] Diane Ravitch, The Great School Wars (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 22-23.

[2] Ibid., p. 190.

City Board of Education estimated that, from a population in grades 9-12 of nearly 250,000, "each year approximately more than 40,000 students drop out of high school." [3] This number translates into a dropout rate of close to 45%.

In her study of turbulent times in the history of New York City's public schools, Diane Ravitch makes an interesting point about the different public attitude toward those who dropped out in earlier times and who found jobs in factories and shops, and toward those leaving school in recent years: "The child who left school at age fourteen to go to work was called 'industrious' in 1905; fifty years later, the same child would be labeled a social problem and a dropout, because the economy of the city could not legally use him, and in fact, would have difficulty finding a place for him at age seventeen or eighteen, when he was of age to work." [5] Furthermore, there is a strong correlation in our time between wide public notoriety resulting from numbers of unemployed school leavers on the streets and flurries of professional attention paid to the dropout problem.

In the 1950's New York City contended with the "juvenile

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[3] The Dropout Report (New York: New York City Board of Education, 1979), p. 1.

[4] Ravitch, p. 243.

delinquent" and warring street gangs. Sociologists, psychologists, educators, and others studied these dropout youths intensely and produced reams of analytical and prescriptive materials. In the 1960's a constant flow of studies on idle, unemployed, alienated, and out-of-school youth--who originated not only from poverty homes and neighborhoods but also from more affluent environments--was produced. [5] The decade of the 1970's saw crimes committed by young people, many on drugs and most out of school, rise in staggering proportions in the city; attempts by professionals to explain and deal with the phenomenon of the dropout continued.

Curiously, throughout these recent decades when the dropout problem received massive periodic attention (nationally as well as locally), there is little evidence of a focused centralized effort developed by the New York City Board of Education to contend with such large numbers leaving school. To be sure, over the years the problem was documented and addressed in a number of studies. [6] To be sure, there were

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[5] A sample collection of these can be found in Daniel Schreiber's reader, Profile of the School Dropout (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

[6] Interrupted Education: Students Who Drop Out (New York: New York City Board of Education, 1979), pp. 118-119.

some relatively large-scale programs for disadvantaged youth such as "Higher Horizons" and College Discovery and Development. There were many training and employment programs financed by the federal, state, and local governments. Evening high schools continued to serve a number of school leavers. Auxiliary Services for High Schools, established in 1965, served others throughout the city with remedial programs designed to prepare dropouts to take the High School Equivalency examination. And, to be sure, during these years many caring professionals worked in schools and neighborhoods to reduce alienation and anti-social behavior among adolescent populations; they tried to keep disaffected young people in school, or tried to return them to school settings.

It was not until 1978, however, that a different, more focused approach to the dropout problem began to take shape centrally. A new mayor had taken office; his administration believed that management theory and practice could and should be applied to help solve massive urban problems. The Board of Education appointed a new Chancellor of Schools, Frank J. Macchiarola, who was also a management-oriented administrator. He in turn selected a new Executive Director of the Division of High Schools, Nathan Quinones, and charged him

with, among other responsibilities, the development of large-scale, centrally-initiated programs to reduce the number of high school dropouts. It is to these central efforts that this study will now turn.

II. RETRIEVAL: THE OUTREACH CENTERS

Two documents of note, which preceded the setting up of Outreach Centers, were issued by the Board of Education in the fall of 1979. The first, Interrupted Education: Students Who Drop Out, is an extensive study based on a series of interviews with students (potential and actual dropouts and returnees), and with various school personnel. It goes on to analyze prevention and retrieval programs already in existence, and it concludes with a series of recommendations. Among its many valuable suggestions are these: that the Board of Education set a priority of returning to school as many dropouts as possible through establishing counseling centers and initiating a media campaign; that financial resources for special dropout programs be strengthened; and that accurate statistics on dropouts for New York City schools be collected. [7] The last recommendation served as one impetus among others toward production of the second document.

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[7] Op. cit., pp. 109-112.

This work, The Dropout Report, which was initiated by the Division of High Schools of the New York City Board of Education, attempts to standardize the definition of "dropout" and to define a formula for reporting numbers and rates from the high school population. It analyzes briefly existing programs, and then makes a series of programmatic recommendations. Among these is the establishment of centers which would contact, test, and them place dropouts in appropriate educational settings. [8] This recommendation was the kernel of the Outreach Center concept.

In the spring of 1980, the Division of High Schools opened five Centers, and a sixth was added in the fall of that year. Their locations are significant because they were set up in areas and neighborhoods perceived to have large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people. Thus, one Brooklyn Center is situated in Bedford-Stuyvesant and another in the Bushwick section; the Bronx has its single Center in a similar neighborhood site; the Queens Center has two branches, one in the south and one in the north of the borough; and Manhattan has two Centers in both its lower and upper reaches. Also in 1980, a media campaign was launched with posters advertising the program

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[8] Op. cit., pp. 34-35.

placed on subways and buses and with radio spots broadcast over local stations.

The Division of High Schools designed a set of specific goals to provide an operational framework for the Centers:

1. Attracting dropouts to the program.
2. Assisting youngsters in determining realistic aspirations through diagnostic testing and individual and group counseling.
3. Working with the student to attempt to overcome obstacles interfering with his or her education.
4. Assisting the student in determining and arranging placement in an educational setting which is appropriate to his or her needs.
5. Developing an individual educational program with each student.
6. Providing competency instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, life skills, and other related subjects.
7. Developing skills which will better enable the student to enjoy a fuller life in an industrialized, urban society.
8. Opening the students' vistas to the wide range of career opportunities and preparing them for those careers.
9. Offering as many hands-on educational experiences for the students as possible, and helping students to acquire jobs.
10. Cooperating with groups within the community to provide more services to the students and to make the students aware of their relationship with the community. 9

To determine to what extent these goals were being met

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9 Summary Report on Holding Power Efforts, 1980-1981 (New York: New York City Board of Education, Division of High Schools, 1981), pp. 4-5.

in the Centers, and to deflect the criticism often leveled at Board of Education programs for being "doomed to success," an independent evaluation was commissioned. A team from Bank Street College prepared two separate analyses of the Outreach program.

The first, completed in July of 1980, was based on an interview model and the collection of data from the Centers. Summary recommendations of this report were:

> [We] recommend that all facets of the program be defined in terms of goals and process and outcome objectives. We recommend standardized start-up and operating procedures. We recommend that all program curriculum components be carefully and analytically examined and fully developed. We recommend the development of formal retrieval, referral, transfer and follow-up mechanisms. We recommend a program of staff development and formal linkages with community services. We recommend job development and employment training options be in place in the fall. We recommend the establishment of a program advisory board as well as center-level advisory boards prior to program start-up in the fall. [10]

The second, completed in September, 1981, indicated that the following elements of the program would need continued attention: providing greater employment opportunities for the client population; refining referral and testing procedures; meeting the child care needs of attendees; and

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[10] Carol Sacker Weissman and Mary Mirabito, "Formative Evaluation of the New York City Board of Education Adolescent Outreach Program" (New York: Bank Street College, 1980), pp. 35-36.

strengthening systems of personal contacts between the dropout population and the Centers. [11]

Let us turn at this point to some cumulative data which will show how the Centers are affecting a portion of New York City's dropout population. From the data we can see what performance indicators are in operation to assess the accomplishments of the program, and we can also see to some extent how the preceding recommendations were acted upon.

As of December, 1981, five Centers had been in operation for twenty-two months and one for fourteen months. During that period, a total of 7,591 clients had been served by the program. Of these, 5,565 had been registered as students, while the remaining 2,026 had been referred to other placements. Almost all of these referrals were to alternate Board of Education or other agency programs.

Between September, 1980 and September, 1981, a pre- and post-testing system in reading and mathematics achievement had been instituted (see preceding page, second Bank Street evaluation recommendations). Using the MAT (Advanced Form) in reading, 1,296 students were tested. Of these, 1,003 improved .1 to 4.0 months (77.4%), 197 decreased their

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[11] Weissman and Mirabito, "1980-1981 Program Evaluation of the Adolescent Outreach Program" (New York: Bank Street College, 1981), p. 6.

scores .1 to 4.0 months (15.2%), and 96 remained unchanged (7.4%). Using the ACT (Advanced Form) for mathematics, a total of 1,405 students were tested. Of these, 1,100 improved .1 to 4.0 months (78.3%), 178 decreased .1 to 4.0 months (12.7%), and 127 remained unchanged (9.0%).

Through November, 1981, an estimated total of 350 high school diplomas had been awarded at the six Centers. Of these, approximately 298 were High School Equivalency diplomas and the other 52 were regular high school diplomas which included competency testing as a requirement. (That these figures are not precise indicates that some refinement of client follow-up procedures is still necessary.)

Also through November, 1981, a total of one hundred twenty-two students had received college placements, or approximately 35% of the cumulative number of graduates.

Given New York City's numbers of approximately 40,000 high school dropouts per year, one might contend that the total students served by the Centers during their nearly two years of operation is not impressive; after all, 7,591 is a mere 9 1/2% of the gross dropout figure of 80,000 for that period of time. But this obviously would be an unfair evaluation which did not take into account various other Board of Education programs serving dropouts, which ignored the variables affecting the gross yearly fig-

ures, and which was based only on quantitative data.

A brief qualitative evaluation of the Outreach Center program is therefore now in order. One might argue idealistically that just one person salvaged from the bleak and unpromising life of the high school dropout in New York City is an accomplishment of significance. One might also argue more realistically that there are two special qualities of the Outreach Centers that need to be recognized in assessing their impact. One is their active mode of operation: through a variety of strategies they seek out clients from the dropout population, essentially signalling to these young people that there are those out there who do care about their lives and futures. This has not been the perceived "official" attitude toward the school leaver in the past, and it seems to be attracting a small but steady and growing stream of clients to the Centers. The other notable quality about the Centers is that their staffs, in one form or another, have created a caring, supportive, family-like atmosphere in the learning environment. Studies of the typical school leaver indicate that a nurturing structure is either missing or very weak in the dropout's history, and by providing it in their design, the Centers have been able to achieve excellent results with their numbers.

Let us return now to recommendations made by the Bank Street College evaluators when the Centers were just getting underway. Responses to these will imply the commitment by the Board of Education both to expand and to refine the operations of the Outreach program.

In its 1981 document, Summary Report on Holding Power Efforts, the Division of High Schools charted steps taken to increase the effectiveness of the Outreach Centers. [12] A Dropout Task Force, formed in September, 1980, continued to meet regularly and to address, among other issues and programs, the needs of the Centers.

The WIN Teen Mother Child Care Project, a cooperative effort between the New York City Board of Education and the Human Resources Administration, set up child care facilities, staffed by early childhood specialists, near or in four of the Centers. (As of December, 1981, a total of 57 Center attendees were utilizing these facilities.)

The Project Real Work Experience was introduced to the program in 1980-1981. A cooperative effort between the New York City Board of Education Office of Occupational and Career Education and the New York City Department of Em-

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[12] Op. cit., pp. 8-10 and 73-76.

ployment, the Project recruited dropouts from the Outreach Centers and provided them with a variety of services, including a subsidized work experience.

Finally, in 1980-1981, one Center started to offer classes during evening hours, and two Centers began operating summer school programs. This overall strong commitment of personnel, funding, and other resources to the Centers has continued through the 1981-1982 school year.

III. PREVENTION: THE TWELVE TARGET SCHOOL CONCEPT

During the period 1979-1980, not only was a central effort initiated to reach students who had already dropped out, but also several system-wide plans were being developed to prevent potential dropouts from leaving.

In his goals and objectives for the year, the Executive Director of the Division of High Schools indicated that holding power was to be concentrated on and increased throughout New York City's one hundred ten high schools. In the management system in effect in the Division of High Schools, each principal was responsible for drawing up his or her own goals and objectives in conjunction with those of the Division, and each, therefore, designed a holding power plan for the individual school. These plans were reviewed by

respective superintendents and then by the Executive Director. By means of this system, it was insured that the dropout problem would receive both renewed and increased attention at the local school level, and that local solutions to the problem would be more actively pursued. In 1980-1981 and 1981-1982, the same goal, with altered and refined objectives, was articulated at the Division level.

There were some schools whose dropout numbers and percentages had shown over the period of several years either a very high rate or a drastic increase. "Twelve Target Schools" were identified from among this group to receive particular attention and assistance from the Division to determine if their dropout rates could be significantly reduced. Unfortunately for the purposes of this study, there is not yet sufficient longitudinal data available to conduct a thorough quantitative analysis of the concept. It would be informative, nevertheless, to look at the dropout rate in a typical "Target School" and then to describe the plan designed to increase its holding power.

In the school year 1977-1978, X High School had a twelfth grade class of 790 in September. In June, 400 of that number had left for various reasons ("over 17," "employment," "not found," and "married"), and 390 were graduated. Thus, the school had a dropout rate of 50.6%. In 1978-1979 the numbers

in September were 998 total; 639 left, 359 graduated, and the rate for that year rose to 64.0%. In 1979-1980, 866 seniors started the year, 653 left the school, 213 graduated, and that year's rate became 75.4%. [13]

The following is an extract of components in the holding power plan designed by X High School for the school year 1980-1981:

Section I. Profile of the Potential Dropout

A. Two years or more older than classmates
B. Low reading and math scores
C. Behavior problems (two or more referrals)
D. Retained at least one year in junior high school or high school
E. Excessive absence (more than 30 in school year)

Section II. Identification of Potential Dropout

A. All incoming applications and records to be screened by guidance counselor
B. All records of present students to be screened by guidance counselor

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[13] This is one variant for determining the dropout rate of a single class. Another variant works as follows: one counts the entering 9th grade class, counts the same class upon graduation, and then subtracts the total who graduated from those who started to obtain the "estimated non-completers"; this figure is then divided by the starting number to obtain the four-year dropout rate. (See The Dropout Report, op. cit., pp. 3-7.)

C. If student matches profile to a high degree, then referral to appropriate holding power program

Section III. The High School Equivalency Program

This program prepares students to obtain the GED diploma and to plan beyond it. Students are seventeen or older, have a minimum reading score of 7.0, and are not achieving in regular classes. Punctuality and attendance are stressed in the classes that students attend daily. They work individually and in groups with materials provided by the school. Two teachers, one for English/social studies and the other for science/mathematics, instruct where necessary. Group and individual guidance by the counselor assists students in improving self-image and decision-making skills.

When the student and teacher agree, the test application is completed and sent to an appropriate testing site. Upon receiving diplomas, students see the counselor for completing college applications, for job placement, or for liaison with the military.

Section IV. The Mini School

Candidates are students who have failed to advance to the 10th grade, or incoming 9th graders whose profiles show them to be potential dropouts. The program is conducted in conjunction with the school-based drug prevention program, SPARK.

Teachers are selected who have demonstrated an ability to work closely and successfully with low-achieving students. Classes are small, schedules are flexible, and block programs in English, social studies, remedial reading, remedial mathematics, and group guidance are designed for the group. The program also features continual monitoring of progress, frequent parental contacts, and the fostering of a close-knit, family-like atmosphere.

Another important element in the concept of the "Twelve Target Schools" was to build into the schools' programs additional vocational strands which would serve both to attract students from feeder schools and to retain them over a three- or four-year period.

A preliminary evaluation of the development of those strands, completed in April, 1981, indicated that there were in the first year some delays in delivering and installing equipment, some difficulties in obtaining appropriate staff, some problems with student recruitment and placement, some problems with developing uniform curricula, and some confusion over the goals of the program.[14] In the school year 1981-1982, progress was made in overcoming these difficulties, particularly with a more efficient delivery of supplies and equipment for the vocational programs.

Overall, the "Target School" concept has to undergo further development and evaluation. Like the Outreach Center concept, however, it was an important step in the right direction toward contending with New York City's droupout problems.

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[14] Vincent A. Troiano, "Preliminary Evaluation Report on the Board of Education Target High School Program" (New York: Economic Development Council, 1981), pp. 9-15.

IV. SUMMARY

> "Dr. Macchiarola said that he has directed the Executive Director of High Schools and other key personnel in the central administration to amplify the practical recommendations included in the study [The Dropout Report] and to prepare a detailed, three-year plan to return a specified number of dropouts to high school each year, to reduce the dropout rate by a specified percentage each year, and to increase each year by a specified percentage the number of students served by dropout prevention and treatment programs."
>
> (from a Board of Education press release, October 16, 1979)

In June of 1982, that three-year period will have ended, and during the succeeding school year a complete review of progress toward the stated management goals will likely take place.

In this interim study, therefore, it may be helpful to focus in summary on some areas of concern that continue to relate to dropout retrieval and prevention in New York City's schools.

The great attention given to the dropout problem by central administrators has produced some interesting tensions. The New York State Department of Education, which oversees all schools in the State, has begun the process of re-registering high schools, and one of the indicators by which it assesses a school is the retention rate; thus,

the New York City high school, with its relatively larger, more transient, and often predominantly minority population, can be penalized for losing numbers of dropouts. At the same time, the local high school is under a philosophical obligation to educate fully every student who comes through its doors; if that student acts out continually and disrupts the learning process for others, the school is faced with the difficult choice of continuing to work in every possible way to help that student adjust and learn, or of referring him or her to an alternate educational setting.

In addition, tension can arise between the Outreach Centers and the local schools. The Centers to a degree have to justify their programs by retrieving numbers of dropouts, while the school may be struggling to keep the same clients within its programs. Even though the Centers are obligated to return the dropout to a day school program if that is deemed the most appropriate referral, competition between the units can be perceived as a problem. Finally, there is tension over the High School Equivalency preparation programs which are incorporated in the holding power plans of many schools. These have proven to be a very successful means of keeping students from dropping out, yet there is still the unresolved question of whether a day high school should prepare students for the Equivalency diploma and not

at the same time provide them with a full day school program leading to the regular diploma.

Clearly, good judgment about these issues has to be exercised by personnel at all levels. And, constant communication and clarification from the Division, to the Outreach Centers, to the local schools, and back, must take place in order to reduce these tensions.

Then there are some continuing problems--externally caused and over which the Board of Education has little control--which plague the New York City school system at all levels and in all its operations.

Money for programs is of course always in limited supply, and those particularly concerned with dropout retrieval and prevention must be creative about supporting and expanding existing programs within budget restrictions.

The staff of New York City's high schools is an older one, and because of budget cuts and more attractive offerings coming from the private sector, it is difficult to attract younger teachers into the system. This older staff often needs some retraining in terms of meeting the educational needs of today's student and today's potential dropout, and large-scale staff development programs along these lines have not yet been instituted.

The youth unemployment problem is perhaps the most

severe of all. New York City's economy has been unable for some time to absorb large numbers of young workers, particularly minority youth, and in the last few years unemployment figures among young people between the ages of 16-24 have been consistently in the 40% or higher range. For all the training programs and job placement systems in operation at the Outreach Centers and at the local high schools, if there are no jobs to be had for the dropout upon completion, then that person will more than likely be lost to the society for good.

As this study shows, in spite of the preceding, and taking into account all the tensions and other major problems affecting the dropout situation in New York City, the school system is nevertheless working constantly and in clearly-defined directions toward reducing dropout numbers.

It is the contention of the study that these efforts would not have begun to be realized, that the dropout problem would have continued to be approached in a piecemeal fashion, if there had not been recently a concerted, central effort to confront and to attempt to solve the dropout problem head-on.

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